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**For more information contact:**  
Mari Serebrov, Communications Manager  
Telephone: 501-682-1701  
Fax: 501-682-5117  
E-mail: [mari.serebrov@arkansas.gov](mailto:mari.serebrov@arkansas.gov)

**GED OPENS THE DOOR TO THE FUTURE**

A second chance. A foundation. The start of a dream. A good first step. A new beginning.

That's how Louise Dunn of Mena and Billie Reed of St. Joe view their GEDs. For both of them, the general equivalency diploma opened the door to a college education and careers that allow them to make a difference in Arkansas.

The women recently were awarded the Arkansas Cornelius P. Turner Award. Named for the founder of the GED Testing Program, the award recognizes Arkansas GED graduates who have made outstanding contributions to society in education, public or social service.

Both Dunn and Reed admit it wasn't easy getting their GED.

"I just thought, 'I'm too old. What good would it do me?'" Dunn says.

As a teenager, Dunn had no options for the future, she says. Few women she knew worked outside the home. Like many other young women of her generation, she gave up school to get married and have a family.

The turning point for Dunn occurred when she was working in their chicken

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house with her husband, William Dunn, after their children were grown.

“We had some ups and downs in the chicken business,” Dunn says. And at the time, the couple was facing yet another down.

“I made the comment that ‘there has to be something out there besides this,’” Dunn says. When her husband asked her what she wanted to do, she quickly answered that she wanted to go to school. Then go, he told her.

A few days later, Dunn ran into Pat Phillips, a GED teacher in Mena. Phillips encouraged her and wouldn’t let her give up on her dream. Due to Phillips’ mentoring and her husband’s support, Dunn says, she got her GED in 1985 at the age of 46. Two years later, she graduated, with honors, with an associate’s degree. And in 1989, she received her bachelor’s degree, with honors, from Arkansas Tech.

Although she was younger when she got her GED, Reed’s story isn’t much different. She says she dropped out of school when she was 15 to have a baby. To help support her young family, she left her schoolbooks to work in the Levi Strauss plant in Harrison.

When the factory offered its workers a chance to get a GED on company time, Reed jumped at the chance, even though “it was intimidating,” she says.

A few years later, the factory closed. Reed used her severance benefits to get her associate’s degree at North Arkansas Community College. From there, she enrolled in John Brown University’s bachelor’s degree program that was offered on the North Arkansas campus.

Pursuing their education resulted in some short-term sacrifices for Dunn and

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Reed. But they agree the long-term results have been worth it.

Dunn retired this summer following a fulfilling career of teaching and serving as financial aid director at Rich Mountain Community College.

“This has been our salvation,” Dunn says of the GED. Shortly after she went back to school, her husband’s health deteriorated. She’s convinced that without her education, she and her husband would be on welfare today.

Had it not been for the GED, Reed says she would be stuck with whatever job happened to be available. Instead, she is the coordinator of the College Now program at North Arkansas College.

Reed’s family also is reaping the benefits of her education. She says because of her increased earnings, she and her husband, Joe Reed, can provide more for their teenage sons, Cody and Jerry Joe Reed. And she thinks her sons have a greater appreciation of education.

Arkansas is one of the few states that offer free GED testing and classes. In 2003, more than 7,500 Arkansans took the GED test. Of that number, 83 percent passed – compared with the national pass rate of just over 70 percent, Janice Hanlon, Arkansas GED administrator, says.

Speaking at the GED Examiners Conference in Little Rock last week, Lt. Gov. Win Rockefeller stressed the need for the GED program. He said 22 percent of the state’s adult population can’t function above the fifth-grade level, and another 34 percent can’t function above the eighth-grade level.

Reed and Dunn have some advice for those Arkansans: Get the GED.

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“You’ve just got to take that step,” Reed says. “It’s important to realize it’s not easy. . . Just stick with it. . . [You] can make it through.”

Dunn adds, “It’s worth it.”

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